


Groundwater is at historic low levels throughout California

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By J.N. Sbranti

Groundwater levels throughout California and particularly the Southern San Joaquin Valley are at historic lows, a Department of Water Resources report released Friday shows.

In many areas of the San Joaquin Valley, groundwater levels this spring are more than 100 feet less than the previous historic lows, according to the 51-page report.

Water levels in many parts of Stanislaus and Merced counties have fallen by 10 feet or more since spring 2010, the reports maps show.

Groundwater concerns began escalating last summer in Stanislaus after a cluster of domestic wells near Denair stopped working.

Fourth of July weekend my well went dry, said Gary Shriver, whose Denair home is on East Monte Vista Avenue. He spent \$13,000 to drill a much deeper well, but he doesnt blame just the drought.

Shriver thinks too many new agricultural wells are draining Stanislaus aquifer.

What are we going to do, just pump it until we all go dry? Shriver asked. Until the county can figure this out, they should stop handing out permits (for new agricultural wells).

Eighty-year-old Joseph Calderon of Ceres also is worried.

During the past three years, Calderon said, the well water level has dropped more than 10 feet at his Prairie Flower Road home. He already has lowered the well pump twice, but he fears he will have to drill a deeper well if the aquifer falls further.

How am I going to afford a new well on the \$700-to-\$800 a month I get (from Social Security)? Calderon said. The water level keeps dropping and dropping.

During average years, groundwater supports about 40 percent of Californias urban and agricultural water uses. But agricultures reliance on groundwater increases dramatically when drought causes shortages in surface water supplies from rivers and dams, forcing irrigation districts to reduce canal water deliveries.

State researchers say the results of this groundwater study are particularly alarming because they are based on springtime well measurements, when groundwater levels typically peak.

As summer arrives in this third drought year, demand on wells is expected to increase.

The dry conditions have exacerbated long-standing issues in basins, highlighting the need for long-term sustainable management of Californias groundwater, the report concludes.

California is one of the few states that does not regulate how much water well owners can pump. It does not even require well owners to report how much they pump.

Most of the information in the report comes from a well water database that relies on volunteer reports and wells monitored by the state or other public agencies.

Stanislaus recently formed a Water Advisory Committee to draft recommendations for better monitoring and managing of the countys groundwater. Its proposals are supposed to be presented to Stanislaus Board of Supervisors in June.

Every Stanislaus resident relies on well water for drinking. Whether they pump it themselves or depend on water districts to pump it for them, their water comes from the ground.

Being good stewards of our groundwater basins is essential for ensuring that we can turn to them during dry years when these resources are critically needed, state Department of Water Resources Director Mark Cowin said. We must work together to control groundwater overdraft to avoid impacts such as land subsidence, seawater intrusion, and migration of poor quality water.

State officials have been monitoring land subsidence in the Central Valley including in southern Merced County and working with county agencies to track areas experiencing drought-related groundwater problems.

If they dont get on top of this groundwater situation, theyre going to turn this valley into a desert, warned 91-year-old DeLoyd Van Dyke of Oakdale.

Van Dyke has lived in Stanislaus County since serving as a pilot during World War II, and he said many people dont realize there have been 20-year droughts in this regions history.

Van Dyke relayed how the well at one of his former homes in Riverbank has had its water level drop more than 50 feet during the past 40 years. He thinks everyone should be concerned.

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